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Cleanup of city's watershed on track after 15-year delay

Judge C. Judson Hamlin finally said what needed to be said for more than 15 years: "If I don't do it, it's not going to get done."

The Superior Court judge's words this week signal hope that what remains useful of Perth Amboy's drinking water supply at the Runyon Watershed in Old Bridge will be saved from an invading plume of underground pollution.

But Hamlin's decisive action comes after years of bungling on the part of state and local agencies, as well as the industries themselves. This happy news for the people of Perth Amboy also is a somber lesson in how their public agencies have betrayed them.

With his ruling this week, Hamlin wrested control of the cleanup of Runyon Watershed from the two industries that polluted it.

Until the judge's order, these industries — CPS Chemical Co. and Madison Industries Inc. — had succeeded largely in stalling efforts to save Perth Amboy's water supply from a mass of underground contaminants which has already overtaken important drinking wells.

In Hamlin's decision, released this week, even the city of Perth Amboy, which sued for this very solution, is excluded from the cleanup.

The state Department of Environmental Protection and Energy, which played a key role in fumbling two previous cleanup orders, is the agency in charge of the operation.

But Hamlin hasn't left the agency to its own devices. He demanded a DEPE ground-water cleanup plan within 30 days, and insists on

monthly reports of the cleanup progress from the agency.

As for CPS and Madison Industries, both must pay a total \$2.5 million within three months into a fund to be used by DEPE for the cleanup. If the industries can't pay, as one company's chief executive testified during the trial, federal money would be available.

However, there's no question this step comes rather late in the saga of Runyon's water contamination.

Government ground-water tests show that the pollution plume emanating from the two industries has overtaken active drinking wells at Runyon. The advance of the contamination, which includes zinc, lead, and cancer-causing benzene and chlorobenzene, has been nearly unabated over 15 years and through two previous court rulings designed to stop it.

Judge Hamlin placed the blame for the inaction with DEPE and the previous Perth Amboy administration under Mayor George J. Otlowksi. Their failure has diminished a major natural resource that might have supplied the entire region with water. Now, officials hope it will fulfill even the city's water needs.

Praise is due the administration of Mayor Joseph Vas, which sought to remove the two industries as the key decision-makers in the cleanup. The administration wisely entered a partnership with the DEPE, and hired a skillful environmental attorney to achieve this very result.

With the administration's determination, and Judge Hamlin's vow of vigilance, Runyon's future is brighter.

